

Discourse on the book
"Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism"

by Dave Olson - January 2003
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In the book "Michael Jordan and the new Global Capitalism," the writer LaFeber outlines Michael Jordan's basketball career and various endorsement and business ventures as a backdrop for discussing global economics. I feel however that LaFeber overestimates Jordan's impact on his own good economic fortune. While of course Jordan shoots the baskets and appears in the advertisements, his business career and public image are maintained by a well-compensated crew of agents, lawyers and advisors.

Since he first showed exceptional talent, Jordan has been handed papers to sign by special interests, from agents to college recruiters to merchandisers to investors, the list goes on. He is well insulated from the perils of the world and enjoys the luxury of being able to satisfy his own wishes in most any way he chooses, buy a team, play baseball, fly to Vegas, etc..

Why is LaFeber surprised when Jordan doesn't speak up on racial or human rights issues. I do not think Jordan should be expected to speak out and be knowledgeable about his business dealings after all he is an athlete who is become wealthy due to his specific DNA package, not because of his cunning business intellect or caring for working conditions. Considering someone who has been a millionaire since early 20s and spent limited time in school studying academic topics and enjoyed a free ride college cakewalk to care about anything besides making himself more money? It is a rare human let alone athlete who is able to shoulder that mantle.

I did enjoy mention of Jordan's "wholesome" images and American values knowing of several out of court monetary settlements he's made to various jilted women, (documents outlining a recent incident can be seen at thesmokinggun.com). He has clearly surrounded himself with fine lawyers and public relations folks who have kept his image shiny though he is a known gambler, adulterer, cigar smoker not too mention his involvement with Nike and their oft-reported distasteful business practices in foreign countries, attributes which many American consumers find distasteful. (Pete Rose should have hired the same guys).

The book points out the ignorance Americans have of other countries situations and wealthy athletes are not necessarily more aware of worker conditions in Sri Lanka than your average consumer at the mall. Their agents, managers, and advisors insulate them from any PR fallout and stay busy brewing up their next commission check while corporate accountants find ways to shave pennies of an end-product. even if that means lousy working conditions in a country they will never visit. If we are relying on athletes to change that, we are in a lot of trouble.

The other day I wondered aloud why well to do (as well as "has-been") athletes and actors sell themselves out to any cheesy fly-by-night long distance company and perform on their obnoxious commercials. I mean, at some point isn't your self respect and "legacy" worth more than the ducats? My brother asked me back, "If someone offered you half a million for an afternoon of work, how do you say 'No'?" This is especially likely when athletes have developed a corps of dependents whether it be a "posse" of hangers-on or a dozen illegitimate children or slaving lawyers and managers. By that point, athletes are well used and eager to signing any form with 6 figures plus on it, never knowing when their career will be over and they will be opening car dealerships.

Now with this being said, I am really like sports, am a lifelong hockey fan and cheer for many favorite players who display exceptional skill or heart on the ice. But I don't harbor any reservations that these well-compensated athletes should attempt to offer discourse on any sort of global policy unless they feel personally inclined and are able to express themselves succinctly as to not create a fervor or embarrass themselves or the causes they hope to help. They aren't politicians and, despite the strange quirk of modern society that has elevated these sportsmen to the wealthiest economic class, wealth doesn't suddenly make them eloquent and well-educated.

At the same time, I am impressed by some athletes efforts to aid the communities they live in and that are responsible for their hefty incomes. I say let the professional athletes hold charity golf tournaments and visit hospitals, this is a more realistic use of an popular athlete's ethical and humanitarian largess. Someone else

will have to fix the real problems.

On a related topic, I would like to relate a brief example in which sports can be used to enhance global understanding without the cultural backlash which LaFeber alludes to in his post 9/11 mini-rant.

In 1972, a group of professional hockey players undertook a tournament against the "amateur" USSR Red Army team. Half the games in Canada and half in the USSR, at the height of the cold war, no one from either team had ever participated in such an event as it was organized by the NHL Players Association with proceeds going to their retirement funds. The Russians won the first few games on Canadian soil and the Canadian fans were distraught but the Canadian team pressed into hostile Russia where none of them had ever gone before. The opposing team gave the Canadians every disadvantage from no hot water in the dressing room to changing game start time shortly before. Still the Canadians persevered and won the tournament in dramatic last minute fashion. The Russians and Canadians (the players and the countries) ended up with goodly respect for one another as hockey players and fans. After briefly glimpsing each other cultures through TV as hockey fans, the Canadian and Soviet citizens began to thaw away some of the mystery of life on either side of the Curtain and managed to continue some trade relations and cultural exchange throughout the depths cold war.

(Incidentally, long before basketball was featured so many rising international stars, NHL was helping players negotiate their way out of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and the like and started playing North America vs World all-star games several years ago.)

From a writing and publishing standpoint, I wonder who or what the author or publisher had in mind as an audience as Lafeber seems to be pandering to Jordan fanatics to force along his watered-down sermon on globalization and worker's conditions without either saying anything new or offering any solutions or insight for moving forward. Further I was rather irritated by his quoting and unwieldy footnote style.